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## Consumption patterns and perception of healthiness of convenience foods in low-income urban communities: implications for public health

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### Abstract

The prevalence of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is rapidly increasing in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including Ghana. One of the primary contributors to the rise in NCDs is the consumption of certain types of convenience foods, which are typically nutrient-poor and energy-dense. This study explores the types of convenience food in low-income urban communities in Accra and assesses consumers' perceptions regarding their healthiness as well as their consumption patterns.

This research utilised a quantitative cross-sectional design and sampled 150 respondents, selected through a multistage sampling technique. Standardised, structured, pre-tested, and piloted questionnaires were employed to interview the respondents. The questions evaluated consumers' patterns of convenience food consumption, their perceptions about the healthiness of convenience foods, and socio-demographic variables.

The study categorised convenience foods into three levels: low-level convenience (LLC) foods, semi-convenience (SC) foods, and high-level convenience (HLC) foods. LLC foods are raw foods and ingredients that require cooking or preparation. The second consists of industrially processed foods that need further processing in the household before consumption, and the HLC foods are ready-to-eat meals and products, which are mainly made up of sweet and salty snacks, desserts, and similar products. The SC and HLC foods are mainly linked to low nutrient and high energy densities. Most households (76 %) acquired both SC foods and HLC foods from traditional markets and convenience stores. Notably, 51 % of respondents perceived HLC foods as healthy. The main drivers of the purchase and consumption of HLC (e.g., carbonated drinks, energy and high-calorie drinks, salty foods, and fast foods) are their ease of access and affordability.

The findings suggest that convenience foods are commonly consumed in low-income urban communities, partly due to accessibility, affordability, and time constraints. This trend has potential implications for the rising burden of NCDs, especially when combined

with misconceptions about the healthfulness of processed foods. The study underscores the urgency for targeted public health policies and behavioural interventions that address food literacy and promote healthier, affordable convenience food alternatives tailored to the needs of urban-poor populations in Accra.

**Keywords:** Accra, convenience foods, Food consumption, NCDs, Nutrition, Poor diets, Urban poor